

Alcohol Studies in India: Making case for Space

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Abstract

The paper aims to review the literature on Alcohol and drinking in India and argues for a spatial understanding of the social phenomenon. Two distinct strands emerge from the review, first, the works that exclusively focus on 'the death and disease perspective' and second and connected to the first, emerging out of the concern of dire consequences of alcoholism, focus on the prohibition aspect. Both the strands rarely engage with the spatial understanding of the phenomenon. A critical analysis of these works highlights the problems inherent in these works. The paper argues that a spatial perspective can open avenues for research in alcohol geographies. In doing so, we propose directions for future research from the geographical perspective.

Keywords: Alcohol, Space, Drinking, India, Policy

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to review the literature on Alcohol and drinking in India and argues for a spatial understanding of the social phenomenon. Two distinct strands emerge from the review, first, the works that exclusively focus on 'the death and disease perspective' and second and connected to the first, emerging out of the concern of dire consequences of alcoholism, focus on the prohibition aspect. Both the strands rarely engage with the spatial understanding of the phenomenon. A critical analysis of these works highlights the problems inherent in these works. The paper argues that a spatial perspective can open avenues for research in alcohol geographies. In doing so, we propose directions for future research from the geographical perspective. Elsewhere beyond India, Valentine et al (2008) identify geographies of drinking and alcohol as a fertile site for exploring its complexities. Taking leads from there, we make the case for alcohol geographies in India and highlight the possible directions for future research. First, we discuss the death and disease perspective of Indian works on alcohol. Second, we focus on the sparse yet diverse literature on Prohibition. Third, we make a case for alcohol geographies in India charting out the future directions.

The Death and Disease Perspective

An overarching corpus of studies in India pertains to the death and disease perspective. This is attributed to the social consequences of drinking. Eashwar et. al (2020) note that about 62.4% of all deaths are caused by liver cirrhosis, a cause attributed to alcohol consumption. Alcohol consumption affects family conditions and is related to domestic violence against women (Markowitz, 1998; Benegal et al, 2010), drains family income (Bonu et al, 2004; Benegal et al, 2010) and affects children's education negatively. Furthermore, it is documented that driving under the influence of alcohol amounts to a considerable proportion of traffic accidents (Sagolssem, 2020; Korlakunta et. al, 2019; Sahay et al, 2018; NIMHANS, 2010). Needless to say, the works are largely focused on the negative effects of alcohol consumption on individuals- who consumes and how much (Girish et al, 2010; Ghosh et al, 2012; Kumar et al, 2013; Lakshmi et al, 2014; Vindhukumar et al, 2016; Ramanan et al, 2016; Eashwar et al, 2019; Teli et al, 2019). More so, these works complicate the understanding of how such a behaviour comes to be. Few selected works throw complexity over the issue.

Soundararajan et al. (2017) studied the age at which men had their first drink and its correlation with adult life drinking patterns in alcohol-dependent patients in Bengaluru. They argue that the age at which individuals have their first drink influences their later-life drinking patterns. They observe that risk-taking behaviour during adolescence, coupled with the dynamic process of brain maturation contributes to heavy alcohol consumption.

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Furthermore, religion, culture, alcoholism in the family and socioeconomic factors all play important roles in the beginning and persistence of alcohol consumption. The majority of upper- and lower-class patients reported having their first drink before the age of 21, including those with a favourable family history of alcoholism. Among married men, the majority of the patients had completed only high school. In terms of religion, Muslims had a higher age at their first drink compared to Hindus.

Mahanta et al. (2016) estimate the prevalence of alcoholic drink use among school-going adolescent students in the industrial town of Assam. It is noted that some communities prepare rice-based alcoholic drinks in their household in Northeast India. These drinks are used for religious and social functions and are consumed even in the presence of parents and elders. The easy access to illicit substances in industrial towns and the lack of social inhibition for homemade alcohol consumption have increased the vulnerability of youth to these habits. For example, Parent's behaviour of consuming tobacco or alcohol influences their children's habits (Munda et al; 2019). Father's habit was found to be associated with male offspring's consumption of commercially available alcoholic drinks (CADs). Thus, a significant proportion of students were found to be using one or more substances in addition to alcohol. Notably, a high percentage of male adolescents in the industrial town of Assam consume alcoholic drinks from a very young age due to their early exposure. Similarly, Chaudhary et al. (2015) studied the prevalence of alcohol use among undergraduates at Rohilkhand Medical College, Bareilly. They note that there is a significant association of alcohol use among medical students with family history and family background along with the mother's occupation. Regression analysis reveals that only the mother's occupation was significantly associated with alcohol use indicating that parental behaviour toward alcohol use has a significant impact on their children's behavior. However, the father's occupation had no significant association with alcohol use. The mother's occupation whether working or not and the type of family nuclear or joint had a significant association with the habit of drinking and its impact on indulgence in alcohol use.

Rakshase (2016) estimates the prevalence of alcohol dependence among males in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala, a state with traditionally high alcohol consumption due to the early initiation of alcohol use in India. The author notes that most people who start drinking at a young age consume alcohol heavily contributing to increased alcohol dependence. It was found that alcohol dependence was highly driven by socio-demographic factors such as marital discord, low income, poor education and unemployment. Religious factors also influenced alcohol use with Muslims opposing alcohol use as it is prohibited by the Quran. This situation was consistent in both urban and rural areas. Gupta et al. (2003) discuss the patterns of drinking among middle-aged and elderly men in Mumbai among the lower and lower-middle sections of the general population. They note the shift in the pattern of drinking in India from occasional and ritualistic use to being a social event where the primary purpose of alcohol consumption was to achieve intoxication (Mohan et al., 2001). These changes raise concerns regarding the health and social consequences of excessive drinking (Saxena, 1999). More so, they note, country liquor, a distilled alcoholic beverage made from locally available sources like sugarcane, palm, coconut or affordable grains is the most frequently consumed type of alcoholic beverage due to its widespread availability and affordability. Among Indian-Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL), whisky emerges as the most widely consumed alcoholic beverage. Working-class men often gather around liquor shops every evening to enjoy drinking and socializing in Delhi (Sagolsem, 2023); however, a pattern not unique to Mumbai.

While the prevalence of Alcohol is largely prevalent among men, studies focusing on women highlight them both as consumers and at the receiving end of men's consumption. Ratheesh (2010) notes that a larger proportion of rural women than urban women reported drinking weekly or more frequently as well as on special occasions. Poor women in both rural and urban areas mainly consumed arrack (country liquor) or moonshine (illicit liquor) and were more likely to drink at home or purchase from off-license retail outlets. Rao et al. (2010) assess the prevalence, nature and factors influencing alcohol use among outpatient rural women of Telangana region, Andhra Pradesh. The majority of the 71 women studied started drinking at a young age initiated by their family members, and consumed toddy as the main alcoholic beverage. The common reasons for drinking were sleeplessness, stress, easy availability and financial freedom. The women reported various physical and psychological complications due to alcohol use such as gastrointestinal symptoms, hypertension, withdrawal delirium and depression. A high rate of pregnancy drinking was also observed, influenced by cultural beliefs that toddy improves foetal health and facilitates delivery. Only 0.2% of the women came for follow-up after

receiving brief psycho-education about the harms of alcohol use. The study highlights the existence and severity of the problem of alcohol use in rural women of this region, which is often underreported and neglected by the society and the health care system. The study also reveals the low perception and awareness of alcohol problems among these women, and the barriers to seeking treatment, such as stigma, lack of accessibility, family involvement and peer pressure.

Parekh et al. (2021) examine the effects of husbands' alcohol consumption and women's empowerment on intimate partner violence (IPV) in India, using data from the 2015-16 National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4). They constructed a composite women's empowerment index (WEI) based on eight indicators of women's autonomy and control over their lives and analysed its association with husbands' drunkenness and different types of IPV, namely emotional, physical, severe and sexual violence. The study finds that women whose husbands are sometimes or often drunk have higher odds of experiencing physical, emotional and sexual violence than women whose husbands are never drunk. The odds of IPV increased linearly with the frequency of husbands' drunkenness. This is consistent with previous studies that have documented the link between alcohol use and aggression, and the role of alcohol in exacerbating marital conflict and gendered power dynamics (Foran & O'Leary, 2008; Gustafson, 1994; Peralta et al., 2010). It also finds that for all types of IPV, an increase in the WEI was associated with a reduction in the odds of experiencing violence. This suggests that women's empowerment has a protective function against IPV, as women who have more control and choice over their lives may be less vulnerable to violence from their partners. This is in contrast to some studies that have found that women's empowerment may increase the risk of IPV, as it may challenge the established gender roles and norms, and provoke a backlash from men who feel threatened by their wives' independence (Dalal, 2011; Wayack Pambe et al., 2013).

The above works stand to the specific aims of their study focusing on key determinants and effects of alcoholism on individuals, their families and the society at large. These studies are localized and highlight class, gender, age and urban/rural specificity in the prevalence of alcohol. It is evident from the literature that these variables influence alcohol consumption patterns and culture in India (Ratheesh, 2010). However, the inherent spatiality of the groups is uncritically examined in most studies. The prevalence of alcoholism and the dire consequences on health and society has largely called for its regulation from the state, Alcohol is a State subject in India. As such various states have devised rules and regulations to control it while some states have chosen to completely ban the sale and consumption of alcohol. The next section focuses on works that deal with the regulation of alcohol.

Prohibition

Luca et al. (2019) demonstrate a clear link between alcohol regulations and reduced alcohol consumption addressing public health concerns. The findings highlight the potential of regulatory measures in mitigating the health risks associated with alcohol abuse providing a compelling case for policymakers. Coupled with it anti-arrack or temperance movements have called for a complete ban on it. Few states like Gujarat and Bihar have gone all the way to completely prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol. In other cases, states have used partial prohibition on alcohol either as temporary measures or limiting them to certain districts. Scholarly works critically look at the failure of such policies and suggest other ways of regulation. The following works highlight the complexity of such policies.

Reddy et al. (1993) illustrate the situation in Andhra Pradesh in early 1992 when an agitation led by women protesting against arrack auctions and demanding a ban on arrack sales spread to nearly all districts of the state. Those consuming alcohol were mostly wage labourers or individuals from low-income groups. In rural areas, arrack and toddy were the most common alcoholic beverages. The proportion of arrack was significantly higher because it was predominantly consumed by poor families, most of whom were agricultural labourers. The women advocated for the prohibition of arrack to secure dignified survival. However, after the post-prohibition phase, it was found that banning arrack did not automatically guarantee that poor people would redirect their expenses toward other domestic items like food, clothing, children's education and sanitation which would improve the standard of living for the entire household. Instead, the results showed that poorer households remained highly vulnerable to illicit liquor, matka, single-number games, drugs, etc.

Jha (2022) focuses on the implementation and repeal of alcohol prohibition in Chandrapur district, Maharashtra. In January 2015, the government declared Chandrapur district a “dry” area and enforced alcohol prohibition from April of that year. This prohibition included a legal ban on the manufacture, transportation, possession and sale of alcoholic liquor with exceptions for medicinal or scientific purposes. One of the main reasons cited by the government for prohibiting in Chandrapur was to curb the flouting of alcohol bans in the neighbouring districts of Wardha and Gadchiroli. The ban in Chandrapur was seen as essential to making the prohibition policy effective in those districts. As per the Maharashtra Prohibition Act of 1949, prohibition existed throughout the entire state. However, the enforcement of alcohol prohibition in specific districts depended on government decisions. In April 2015, Wardha, Gadchiroli and Chandrapur were declared completely alcohol-free with no liquor-trade licenses issued in these districts. Despite the initial declaration of prohibition in Chandrapur, the state government annulled the prohibition in June 2021. The decision to repeal the prohibition was made due to evidence suggesting that the district administration had failed to implement the ban comprehensively leading to various social and economic consequences. The review committee in collaboration with the state government established that Chandrapur had suffered severe financial losses and experienced an economic downturn since the ban’s implementation. Social parameters did not show any improvement after the prohibition.

Dalal (2021) examines the legal and social aspects of the prohibition of liquor in Gujarat and questions the validity and effectiveness of the policy. He argues that the prohibition law is outdated, regressive and inconsistent with the constitutional rights and values of the citizens. He also points out the loopholes and challenges in the enforcement of the law and the adverse consequences of the illicit liquor trade and consumption. In contrast, he suggests that the prohibition law should be repealed or amended to allow a regulated and responsible use of alcohol in the state. Dar and Sahay (2018) examine the impact of an alcohol prohibition policy on crime in the Indian state of Bihar. They used a difference-indifference empirical strategy and showed that banning the sale and consumption of alcohol led to an increase in crime, even after adjusting for prohibition-related cases. The rise in violence and property crime was highest in districts with greater black-market prices of country liquor. The paper cautions against ‘big-bang reforms’ in states with weak institutions. Similarly, Kumari (2023) evaluates the impact of the liquor prohibition policy in Bihar, which was introduced in 2016 to reduce domestic violence, improve public health and promote social welfare. She argues that the policy was successful in its initial years but later faced several challenges and drawbacks such as the rise of the illegal liquor trade, the loss of livelihood for the traditional liquor producers, the increase of other substance abuse and the burden on the law enforcement and judicial system. She suggests some alternatives to the blanket ban such as regulation, awareness and rehabilitation.

Rajkamal et al. (2017) studied the opinions among the adult population about the liquor ban in the semi-urban area of Chennai. They found that more than half of the population supported the ban on liquor in the city, especially women due to concerns related to domestic violence, rape, financial management, workplace harassment and education in a patriarchal society. However, one-third of the population preferred a gradual ban due to concerns about potential health issues that could emerge after an immediate ban. A report by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (2010) focusing on different sites including Cuttack, Orissa; Dhule, Maharashtra (one of the most backward districts); Gangtok, Sikkim; Surat, Gujarat (a state under long-time prohibition) and Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh (with a high prevalence of alcohol use and rapidly changing economic parameters) highlight the significant concern about the ineffective implementation of existing alcohol control laws. This was due to the greater economic returns from alcohol sales and the impracticality of prohibition (“jisko chahiye hota hai woh jugaad kar hi leta hai” meaning whoever wants it manages to obtain it). This highlights that addressing individual drinking or heavy drinkers cannot be solely limited to ceasing alcohol consumption, which has led to an overreliance on creating de-addiction centres and rehabilitation centres. The report provides critical insights into the challenges of addressing alcohol-related harms in various regions of India.

Scholars have suggested different methods of regulation and despise the complete ban on alcohol. Gupta et al (2003) suggest to mitigate the impact of alcohol on society, measures such as increasing taxes and tariffs on alcohol, regulating alcoholic beverage advertisements, strict enforcement of regulations related to drunken

driving, and implementing preventive programmes. The authors oppose prohibition as attempted in some states but largely failed to reduce alcohol-related problems, even giving rise to additional issues. D.N. Reddy et al., (1993) suggest raising awareness and implementing necessary rehabilitation and self-help programs among the public to reduce the prevalence of alcoholism. Marara et. al (2016) suggest that States can strengthen alcohol policy by enacting legislation and regulation imposing restrictions on alcohol availability, fostering community mobilization, and promoting education and public awareness in the drinking environment. This approach aligns with the WHO framework on alcohol policy offering the potential for positive effects on sustainable development.

Mahto et al. (2021) provide an essential overview of the current state of alcohol-related policies and hazards in India. Their study effectively frames the significance of this research within the context of India's diverse cultural and societal landscape. The study offers a comprehensive analysis of alcohol policies in India examining licensing, taxation and regulations, elucidating the intricate web of policies governing alcohol consumption. The authors look into the variations in policies across different states highlighting the challenges faced by policymakers in harmonizing regulations. The study underscores the need for evidence-based policymaking to mitigate the adverse health and societal effects of alcohol consumption. The study highlights the importance of evidence-based policies to reduce the negative health and socioeconomic consequences of alcohol intake. The authors offer a set of policy recommendations, emphasizing the significance of addressing alcohol-related problems holistically.

The above works, though sparse, highlight the intricacies of policies floated for the regulation of alcohol consumption. They critically examine the challenges that arise out of prohibition policies and make a case for a comprehensive and sensitive policy. Again, while space is inherent in these policies, it is seldom acknowledged or brought into critical analysis.

Towards a Spatial Analysis

The above-discussed works provide an interesting insight into how alcohol is studied in India. It emanates from the key feature of looking at alcohol as a social problem. It highlights the immediate social implications of the social phenomenon on health and well-being. However, such a literature and research problem conceal many other possibilities and research questions in various fields of knowledge while keeping sustained focus on only certain practices, classes, gender, practices and perspectives. For example, a certain type of class fetishism emerges calling out on lower/working classes as problem drinkers even as in reality people of every class drink. Jayne et. al (2006) argue that studies on 'alcohol, drinking and drunkenness should have at their core an appreciation that drinking alcohol is a practice that transcends social groups, takes place at different times of the day and night, in very different places and venues...' (p. 465). We argue one needs to look beyond the death and disease perspective to have a larger understanding of drinking and alcohol and the myriad questions that emerge to have a nuanced understanding of alcohol, related practices, spaces and its intersections with other variables. We as geographers focus on providing a spatial perspective to the same.

Douglas (2010) argues that anthropologists have a distinctive and valuable approach to studying alcohol use and its social and cultural implications. They challenge the problem-oriented and ethnocentric views of other disciplines and offer a comparative and holistic perspective. Douglas discusses how drinks are used as symbols and rituals to mark social boundaries, identities and events. Drinks are associated with work and leisure, inclusion and exclusion, intimacy and formality, and power and status in different cultures. Practices of drinking are involved in creating and maintaining a sense of order, harmony, and belonging in the face of chaos, conflict, and alienation. Jayne et. al (2006) suggest that research on alcohol must engage 'with the diverse and heterogeneous political, economic, social, cultural and spatial practices and processes' bound up with drinking (p. 465). Geographers have worked on various themes such as the youth cultural & night-time economy (Sagolsem and Bhairannavar, 2021; Greater London Authority, 2017; Sheard, 2011; Eldridge and Robert, 2008; Hollands, 1995), death and crime (Norstrom; 1998; Bromley and Nelson, 2002), drug addiction (Proudfoot, 2017), prevalence of alcohol among school-going students (Mahanta et al., 2016), drinking patterns (Lindsay, 2005; Kneale, 2001).

The findings of the previous works are highly localized and limit their applicability. Rao et al (2010) conclude in their study on rural women consumers in Andhra Pradesh that a regional focus may limit the generalizability of the findings in other areas and that there is a need for a more diverse and representative sample to ensure a broader understanding of alcohol consumption patterns among consumers in different cultural contexts. Agreeing with them, a regional geography of alcohol through consumption, production, distribution and flow can be a potential direction for spatial enquiry. Alcohol is listed as a State subject with each state having its own set of regulations and laws about alcohol. As such different states may produce a diverse regional mapping, given the diversity of pricing, procurement and policies; production, distribution, exchange and consumption; local cultures of brewing, drinking norms, social formations, religious and cultural practices; urban/ rural differences; and role of drinking created through hotspots like tourist places, urban night-time economies, festivals and celebrations, each intersecting with social norms of communities and spatial scales. Such a regional mapping opens space for cross-cultural comparisons between spatial scales, social groups and alcohol landscapes.

Works on Prohibition (discussed in section 3) have lamented the failure of complete bans on alcohol, highlighting the challenges that emerge both administratively and at the level of various political, economic, social and cultural forces. However, a spatial perspective on prohibition calls for a more localized, ethnographic, nuanced understanding of what happens when alcohol is banned. How do the state and civil society enact and execute the policies through spatial strategies of surveillance and administrative set up including police machinery, courts, prisons, rehabilitation centres and Non-Governmental Organisations? How do consumers as active agents navigate these bans through various spatial acts of movement, mobility and location to consume alcohol? Furthermore, scholars have highlighted the emergence of illicit liquor and alternative substances. We are interested in questions of routes, directions and tactics of such illicit trade of alcohol, the nodes and networks of production, supply and distribution and the actors involved; the national, regional, local and international movement of smuggled supplies and distribution of liquor that renders policy ineffective.

In the recent past, Delhi went through a drastic change with the introduction of a new liquor policy, which changed the landscape of distribution and consumption (The Indian Express, 2022, August 31; Sagolsem, 2021). Though the policy was withdrawn and the older one was established after a year, it brought to the fore how drastically new spaces were constituted and geographies of distribution and consumption were created through policy. The questions that emerge are what sort of geographies are produced through distribution and consumption enabled by licencing policies? How does it affect the experiences of alcohol purchasing, consumption and the social making of spaces where alcohol shops are located? How does it shape drinking practices in various urban centres and rural areas across states? Secondly, Increasingly, Indian cities boast of active neo-liberal oriented, consumption-based night-time youth-oriented cultures where alcohol plays a central role. The emergence of pubbing and clubbing cultures has re-oriented the understanding of Indian city life. How do urban planning policies intersect with alcohol-related policies in Indian cities? What are the spatialities that emerge about various stakeholders including urban planners, entrepreneurs, city managers, and consumers including women and children? The work of Murdeshwar (2019) and Sagolsem and Bhairannavar (2021) provide useful insights in such direction bringing together class, gender, urban space, nighttime economy and women's drinking in the context of the neo-liberal city of Mumbai and Delhi. At the centre of their study is the emergence of women as key players and consumers in the night economy in the cultural context of economic empowerment, gendered devaluation concerning women's drinking and gendered public space.

While we have noted the class fetishism of previous works, calling out lower-class male consumers as a pathological problem, one needs to acknowledge and bring to critical analysis how class interacts with space while consuming alcohol. How and where do men and women of different classes drink and in what spatial contexts? What are the key motivations for drinking, choice of sites and implications on identity, social boundaries and cultural meanings? Sagolsem (2023) provides a nuanced reading of men's drinking spaces. He explores drinking practices and social interactions of waged workers in public spaces in urban Delhi. The study deals with leisure, work and class in urban settings. He argues that drinking in public spaces among waged workers is not a sign of deviance or disorder, but a form of leisure and sociability that creates a social world of drinkers. Waged workers use tactics to evade police or consume alcohol uncaught, as drinking in public spaces

is illegal. He notes that men share drinks to build social relations and professional networks. He suggests that drinking in public spaces provides a sense of belonging, identity and solidarity for the workers who face marginalization and exploitation in their work, public space and everyday life. The author challenges the dominant discourse and policy that criminalizes and stigmatizes drinking in public spaces and shows the complexity and diversity of drinking cultures and practices in India.

Lastly, we want to highlight the geographies of home as a potential site of analysis. Noting from previous works the social burden of consumption falls on the family, especially women Dalal, 2011; Wayack Pambe et al., 2013), the home as a site of analysis provides nuanced insights as to what happens in the home when mediated by alcohol. Home is a site of social relations, setting power hierarchies in place between members (Blunt & Varley, 2004). How is alcohol consumption shaped by such hierarchies? In what ways do normative practices of the home shape consumption? How does a home become the site of moral, economic and social devaluation, especially for women and children when mediated by men's consumption practices? In what ways does the home become a central site of alcohol consumption for women? How do children who drink negotiate the power hierarchies of the home? Scholars have noted the influence of family history on an individual's consumption practices (Chaudhary et al., 2015; Mahanta et al., 2016; Soundararajan et al., 2017; Munda et al; 2019). A nuanced understanding of life histories and cultural geographies can unpack the complexities of home and alcohol.

Conclusion

The paper has highlighted the absence of spatial aspect in alcohol studies in India. We have suggested that a spatial perspective deepens the understanding of practices related to alcohol consumption, production and regulation. Such a nuanced understanding can help unpack the complexities around alcohol and help better policy making. While the 'death and disease perspective' is definitely important, a spatial analysis complicates the question of why one drinks and how much and in what contexts. The questions that we raise enables us to move beyond the narrow confines of the death and disease perspective to make wider contributions to the understanding of alcohol drinking and society. As such space that is usually taken as a passive background, when brought to fore as an active agent in making of social worlds, has a bigger potential for deeper analysis.

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